

HERITAGE



HISTORY OF THE 449TH AIR EXPEDITIONARY GROUP

BY COL. HARRIS

Like so many of our fellow units, the 449th Air Expeditionary Group has a long and distinguished history, dating back to the height of World War II. Established on April 6, 1943 as the 449th Bombardment Group (Heavy) the unit was activated on May 1st of the same year and within 4 months had grown from an initial cadre of 52 officers and 33 enlisted to 184 officers and over 1,200 enlisted. By December the men of the 449th had arrived in theater; settling in at Grottaglie Airbase, an Italian airfield recently captured and designated for Allied use thanks to a heavy bombing campaign by the U.S. 12th Air Force.

Life at the former dirigible base was no picnic. The once proud headquarters of Italy's "Marcello Arlotta Airdrome" had been reduced to near rubble in the bombings. The buildings had been emptied and looted. There was no heat, no drinking water, and no furniture. The men slept on bare tile floors until their G.I. cots arrived. All ranks got their

water from a jeep-pulled water cart, and all ranks lined up together for chow and even latrine use. Finally, in March of 1944 showers were installed. Up until that time the full group bathed and shaved out of their helmets.

Despite the difficult living conditions, the men of the 449th went on to distinguish themselves in combat. Flying the mighty B-24 Liberator, they flew their first combat mission on January 8, 1944 against a fighter airdrome at Mostar, Yugoslavia. For the next 16 months the group participated in some of the most notable and harrowing operations of the war, to include the allied landing at Anzio, as well as an heroic bombing campaign against the Nazi gun encampments in southern France, in preparation for the upcoming invasion. By the end of the war the 449th Bombardment Group and its members had received 2 Distinguished Unit Citations, 4 Distinguished Service Crosses, 45 Silver

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Stars, 322 Distinguished Flying Crosses, 299 Purple Hearts, 6 Legions of Merit, 27 Soldiers Medals, 9,980 Air Medals, and 61 Bronze Stars. The men of the 449th returned to the United States in May 1945, a band of truly decorated war heroes.

Upon their return, the unit was redesignated the 449th Bombardment Group (Very Heavy) and began training with a number of new aircraft, including B-17s and B-25s. In late 1945 they transitioned to the B-29 Superfortress and in March of the following year became one of the initial ten B-29 groups assigned to the newly-established Strategic Air Command.

Over the course of the next 30 years the unit underwent a number of redesignations and relocations. In 1959, under the auspices of the 4239th Strategic Wing at Kinchloe AFB, the unit was outfitted with B-52H Stratofortresses and KC-135 Stratotankers. In 1962, as part of an Air Force-wide measure to perpetuate the lineage of inactive bombardment units with illustrious war a record, the unit was redesignated the 449th Bombardment Wing.

Original nomenclature restored, the 449th continued its mission of strategic bombard-

ment training and worldwide refueling operations with renewed vigor. It supported SAC combat operations in Southeast Asia by supplying KC-135 crews and aircraft from 1965-1975 and B-52s from 1968-1975, nearly the entire duration of the Vietnam Conflict. A testament to its steadfast commitment to excellence, the 449th was awarded the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award: 1 Jul 1974-30 Jun 1976. Immediately following its return from Vietnam, the unit went on to win the SAC bombing competition and the Fairchild Trophy in 1976, as well as the Omaha trophy as SAC's best wing for the same year. In September of 1977 the 449th was inactivated due to the closure of its home location, Kinchloe AFB, MI.

For nearly the next 30 years the title of the 449th remained unused. Meanwhile, the enemies of our nation slowly devolved from that of a very tangible nation-state to a much more dynamic and fluid threat. In 2001 our country was directly attacked by these enemies, and the 449th was once again called upon to protect the freedoms and interests of the United States abroad. Redesignated the 449th Air Expeditionary Group, the unit was activated under Air Combat Command and attached to U.S. Air Forces Central in 2003.

Since 2003 its mission has been the support of Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa Personnel Recovery operations; employing HC-130 aircraft along with a contingent of Pararescue forces, for civil and combat rescue operations throughout continental Africa and the surrounding International Waters. By 2005, the 449th AEG had established a foothold in the region and set up its base of operations at Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti. On October 1, 2008 it was reassigned to the 17th Air Force, the Air Force component of United States Africa Command.

Since then, the 449th Air Expeditionary Group has continued to provide uninterrupted coverage and protection of Air Force Assets over its 750,000 sq mile area of responsibility. Much like its fledgling days in World War II, the men and women who proudly serve under the banner of 449th stand ready at a moment's notice to answer their nations call.

With the changing of command from one set of capable hands to the next, we rest assured knowing the work we are accomplishing here in Africa will serve as just the latest successful chapter in the long, distinguished history of the 449th.